

ALDERSON'S WIFE

BY ALAN SULLIVAN

IT was not until after some months of acquaintance that I fully realized how uneven Alderson really was. One is not prone to analyze a man whom one likes—that is reserved for others. He used to sit in front of the fire at the country club, stretching his long slim legs and rambling from one subject to another. It was perhaps the very deftness of his speech that concealed his ineffectiveness, and one does not dig very deep at a country club.

Suddenly it struck me that he was a stationary person, graceful enough, but yet stationary. Other men picked up points and developed, but year after year he saw things from exactly the same angle. Apart from his profession of the law, he dabbled in literary societies and got some reviewing to do from an old college friend, and one could spot the reviews without looking for a signature.

It was my wife who cabined him in a phrase—"sensitively self-satisfied." She knew Ruth Alderson better than most women seem to want to know each other and consequently knew Alderson much better than he imagined.

"It's the things that are not said that are most enlightening," she murmured one evening. "The curious fact is that that house is dominated by the weaker of the two."

"Do you find that surprising?" I hazarded with a chuckle.

"Not altogether, but with us"—She glanced at me with an inexpressible comradeship—"we both know it, and Mr. Alderson doesn't."

"And Mrs. Alderson does?"

"Undoubtedly. I came away with a feeling that it was a frightful waste of splendid material."

"Yes?"

"She's perfectly fine—and perfectly helpless."

"But why helpless?"

"Don't you see? He can't stand even suggestion. She was quite frank about it. What he accomplishes now—and that's little enough—is due entirely to his belief in himself, but if he were to imagine the truth he'd go to pieces at once."

"I don't quite see that."

"Ruth does, and she ought to know. Can't you visualise him? Sublimely pathetic in his egoism and yet so super-sensitive that he would collapse without it."

I was silent for a moment, demanding of myself just how much Alderson mattered. It seemed, by and large, that there were so many more inviting fields for one's interests and perhaps one's energies. Life had its percentage of ineffectives and I wondered what was the quality of whatever scrap of divinity might lie in him to differentiate him from the rest. Then I realized that my wife was gazing at me.

"You are thinking of course of her?"

She nodded. "Yes of course, and that makes him matter too. One can't get out of it. That's the worst of marriage."

"The best of it," I put in humbly.

She glided across the room, balanced herself on the arm of my chair, and began playing with a scanty top-knot which it is the effort of my life to preserve.

"How much?" I said with a shudder.

"Nothing, dear; nothing but your interest and sympathy.

I gulped with astonishment. "You surprise me, and—and—why should I be interested. I don't want to be interested, I've other things to do."

"You will, I know you will, just on her account. And I want you to meet her."

It was therefore with no surprise that I did meet her quite accidentally two weeks later. I felt my wife's gaze fixed on me, as I scanned what was a rather remarkable face. It suggested a personality within—one that moved quite easily and freely and independently of any physical attribute. Her eyes were very dark and lustrous and seemed to mirror for successive fractions of time every possible emotion and sensation. The face was oval, with a straight fine nose, rather large nostrils, and a mouth that seemed as restless as the eyes. For the rest, she had a slight figure, trim shoulders and long, narrow hands.

The moment she looked at me, I felt that most men would be open books to such a woman. She did not express subtlety so much as a terrific and vivid insight. She knew that I knew, that was patent. How much more she knew, would never be betrayed by that roving glance or a line on that smooth face. Conscious of this and of a certain sense of comparison which, if she were at all analytical, must be constantly in her mind, I floundered through the formalities of post-introduction conversation. "I'm surprised we have never met before," I concluded.

This she disregarded. "You know my husband. He often speaks of you."

"Yes, I'm sorry I don't see more of him."

"That's kind of you. You see, he's so busy that it's hard to find time for anything else."

"Then he's a fortunate man, especially in these difficult days."

"Is there much of what you call luck in business, at least in the business of law? Do some men just happen into a good thing? The reason I ask is"—she went on calmly—"that though my husband works very hard, he doesn't seem satisfied with himself."

"No good man is."

She flashed me an inscrutable glance, "or woman?"

"It's exactly the same thing."

"Thank you." She hesitated, then continued evenly. "I'm glad you said that, because when a man's dissatisfied it's called ambition, but in the case of a woman it's discontent."

"And you aren't satisfied?" I parried.

I was sorry the instant I said it. You see, she had taken me on, knowing that I knew, but believing that I had at least sense enough to keep off the grass.

She flushed, then caught at my evident contrition and—leaning on that as security against further missteps—said under her breath. "I don't want anyone to think I'm discontented." Then, raising her dark eyes to mine—"You see that what is often very feasible for a girl is—well—impossible for a married woman."

"I can quite see that."

"So many things make it unfeasible."

"Mrs. Alderson," I said formally, "will you do me the honour to believe that I am very much at your service? I think I need not speak for my wife."

A dull glow mounted slowly into her cheeks, but only her eyes thanked me. "And what might be very simple for some married women would not be so for others."

"That's quite true also," I replied. "I'm afraid it's all rather foolish of me and I'm only beating the air. You see, I feel as though I could—could—" Her voice died in a cadence.

"You look as though you could do anything."

Her expression did not change in the slightest. She seemed impervious to everything that did not bear on the matter in hand.

"You write?" she said slowly.

"In a small way—essays and special articles."

She nodded gravely. "I know. I read them and like them but—"

"Yes, please?"

"You don't write as if you had to. There's a difference."

"You mean I read like a dilettante? I think so myself."

"No—" she protested. "I think you write charmingly, but—you don't mind my speaking like this?"

"I like it."

"Is there such a thing as a frenzy for writing?"

"You mean a feeling that one must write at all costs or else burn up inwardly?"

She looked at me queerly. "How did you know that?"

"Because I have longed for it. Some people have it."

"Who?"

"The best and greatest—only."

There was a moment's silence in which our glances wandered apart. When they met again, her face had turned pale, but her eyes were glowing.

"I'm glad to know that," she half whispered.

That evening on the way home, I was conscious that my wife was waiting for me to talk. This consciousness comes to all married men, and is quite unmistakable.

"I agree with you," I said presently. "She's mentally lonely and wants to write."

"What an excellent thing."

"Perhaps. Yes, I think it is. She's

the sort that might surprise one."

My wife sat back in the car and sighed sympathetically. "He doesn't know."

"It's just as well," I ruminated. "I don't believe she could write if he did."

"Will it be over her own name?"

I shook my head. "Not if she's wise. She doesn't strike me as wanting any personal kudos. If she can express herself to herself, it should be enough."

It was three months later, that my eye fell on a short story in *The Planet*, our leading magazine. It was signed "Deborah." The plot was negligible but the treatment was amazing. There was a virility about it that suggested a mind that had suddenly visited the earth and saw it fresh and glistening, without the dust and grime of ages. The English was peculiar but intensely strong. The atmosphere of the thing and not its denouement made one gasp.

"Mrs. Alderson," I said.

My wife nodded. "Of course. What do you think of it?"

"It's the best thing *The Planet* has got hold of for years. When she finds herself she'll be international."

"And the effect on him if he finds out?"

"Will be just what he deserves."

Alderson's column of reviews came out the week after. In the paragraph devoted to *The Planet*, he wrote:

"A somewhat unusual story appears in this number. It is anonymous, but evidently the work of a woman. It is not without merit but departs entirely from certain generally accepted standards. It has tenseness, if tenseness is a virtue, but presents such interpretations of life as might be held by a young and inexperienced person. We should advise the author to study literary construction and style."

My wife listened as I read. "And to think that people will form their opinion from that," she exclaimed indignantly.

"Not those who read the story. You see every author must decide whether he will write to please the critics or the public. It's a matter of preference and not taste."

"And you?" There was a note of humour in her voice.

"I write to please myself."

"The thing that puzzles me," she remarked going off at a tangent—"is what she's leading up to."

"Why not lead up to herself?"

"She couldn't. She may as you say, express herself, but although she is extremely clever she does not yet realize that all she does must have a direct relation to him. She writes with one part of herself, but even that she has offered to him though he wouldn't take it."

"But you don't see—"

"I see this—that when a woman has lavished herself utterly and withheld nothing that was hers to give, she is anchored for all time with mind and body and spirit. She stays with her gifts. Don't think of Ruth apart from her husband, she isn't that sort."

"Even though he slams her stories?"

"Wait and see."

I did wait, and from that time on our affairs seemed inextricably involved with those of the Aldersons. It was true that I was deeply interested in Mrs. Alderson's progress, but I failed utterly to fathom the process by which my wife gradually enveloped me in a delicate, filmy web that entangled their circumstances with our own. It seemed foolish and unnecessary, but when I voiced a protest it appeared that there was nothing to protest about. It was all tenuous, impalpable and elastic, but a living reality nevertheless. Then one day I met Mrs. Alderson again.

"Congratulations," I said, taking her long, slim hand.

"On what?"

"Deborah is making a name for herself. It's good stuff."

"Ah, you like it then—why?"

"Because it's sincere and uncalculating—therefore refreshing."

Her lips moved nervously. "You have not—"

"No; except to my wife. She knew anyway."

"Yes. She knows everything. You've seen the reviews?" she added calmly.

I laughed. "Reviews, good or unfavourable, are the opinion of an individual."

"Yes—that's it—an individual. We're excellent friends, as you know, but we've never met on that ground. I suppose it wouldn't work anyway."

"It would be hardly fair—to either. Things are much better as they are—You can see that."

"Of course." She smiled as though some memory amused her, then went earnestly on. "But tell me what's the matter with my work—for there must be something the matter."

"Well," I hesitated, "your analysis is remarkable and your situations most dramatic, but from my point of view your treatment is a little hard and uncompromising. You know, however, that *The Planet* wouldn't touch it unless it were first-class."

She glanced away, but I could see her long fingers twisting and untwisting the corners of her silver bag. "Go on please—it's the greatest possible help."

"But it's only the opinion of an individual," I continued, "and I don't know that I'm qualified to criticize your stuff at all. What I feel is that you can impress and almost stun your public, but they will turn to you with fear and fascination and not relief. Forgive me for what I say, but really your work is so—"

"To what extent must people feel what they write?" she demanded, interrupting me swiftly.

"I don't know. The greater their art the more they feel and they certainly should think it—too."

"Can one feel intensely about

something and at the same time persuade oneself that it's not true?"

"Undoubtedly—we all do that. 'It's the compensation awarded to intelligence, isn't it?'"

She smiled brilliantly. "Good-bye, I'm late for lunch already—and—thank you for more than you know."

Naturally enough, I watched closely after that and was not surprised when a certain modulation crept into her work. It was as strong as ever, but more human. The eyes of Psyche began to show through the visor of Athene. The reviewer noted the change and approved mildly. I could visualize his lean face and uncertain mouth as he wrote, and his wife's non-committal glance as he read his opinions aloud.

For some months she dropped out completely, till Deborah reappeared in *The Planet* with one of the most remarkable stories I ever read. It depicted a very ordinary man, hide-bound in tradition and indifference, who by the sheer violation of his own judgment made a success out of a palpably aimless life.

It was notable that Alderson made no mention of it in his columns, although it was the most striking thing in that number of *The Planet*. It appeared that either he hesitated to say what he thought, which was rare for him, or else he was so impressed as to be baffled. At any rate, I could not imagine that the thing was already at an end.

Weeks later I met him at the Club and we agreed to play nine holes. Ordinarily I can beat him three up, but after he made his first drive I questioned my chances. At the sixth we were level. The seventh I won and the eighth was halved. By this time I was conscious that his game had entirely changed. He now swung freely and with a new assurance. His approaching was steady, he got underneath the ball, and his putting had lost its old convulsive stroke.

I got my usual moderate drive

from the eighth tee. Alderson hit viciously, but sliced, and his ball fell in the rough. He lay a hundred yards from the hole, and midway was a clump of fairly high trees.

Now the safe thing was to come out again on the fair green, but Alderson to my surprise settled himself for a big lift over the timber. He swung free and with a clean scoop cleared the trees by five yards. The ball fell dead a few feet from the hole. He went down with his next.

"Good work," I said heartily. "You have improved."

"Yes, I think I have."

"Been with the pro?"

"No, I tried to get at it a new way. I was pretty rotten."

"Evidently, but—"

"It's rather foolish perhaps, but it seems to work. You see, I follow in my mind just where I want the ball to go. I always wondered before and I'm feeling extra fit to-day."

"Your game shows it."

"No, it's not altogether that. You see"—he hesitated and then blurted—"I got the solicitorship for the United Metals yesterday."

I stared at him. "You did!" That post was the lawyer's plum in our Province.

He nodded. "Yes, it came about in a queer way. They mine copper on a large scale over there, and for their smelting plant they need silica-quartz—you know. Well, just across the border line was a gold property that was only paying expenses. I got an option on that and sold it to them. They will use the waste quartz as it comes from the old mill and make the place pay as well as securing their flux."

"And then?"

Alderson swung his brassy at an offending dandelion. I could hear the club whistle, then the yellow disc, nipped from its stalk, jumped ahead. "They seemed to like the way things were handled, and offered me the job. I've got something else on too." He paused and added impersonally—"I

wonder I didn't do it before. It is simple enough if you stand off and look at it. I just woke up to the fact that I was letting the other fellows do all these things."

I ferreted for a reply. He had, it seemed, been re-made, and almost overnight. All the imagination which heretofore, transmuted into sensitive brooding, had turned inward, would now carry him far. His vista appeared to lengthen even as I pondered.

"Can you retrace the sequence of your thoughts back to where all this started?" I ventured. "It's rather remarkable, if I may say so. I—I somehow thought you were analytical rather than constructive."

"Yes, I think—hello! Our respective wives are waiting for tea."

I glanced swiftly at Mrs. Alderson as we mounted the terrace. She was talking rapidly and looked exquisite. It suddenly occurred that she looked too happy to write well.

Alderson ordered tea before I could speak and we settled down in big wicker chairs. My wife's eyes caught my own, but for once I failed to read them.

"You didn't finish," I said.

"The question was what led up to the United Metals affair?"

I nodded. "You don't mind? It's extremely interesting and dramatic."

Mrs. Alderson, chin in hand, stared out over the course. All expression seemed to leave her face, but behind that was a tenseness of attention. To me she seemed to be hanging on what her husband should say, stiffened into a lovely marble lest she be diverted by mundane things.

He took out his pipe and filled it very deliberately.

"It's rather difficult to tell, but I think it started with reviewing. I found it hard at first to do justice to what I did not like. And—"

Mrs. Alderson moved slightly. Her husband lit a match, and I could catch little flecks of flame in the bottom of his brown eyes.

"And then I began to realize what a lot I didn't know. That depressed me for a while, during which I was sorry for the authors I reviewed. But the thing that really started me was an anonymous story signed Deborah."

"That's rather interesting," I hazarded, noting a faint tinge on Mrs. Alderson's pale cheek.

"Yes, very. I tried to find out who she was, but the editor was as dumb as a clam. This story showed me the power of an idea, or in other words of imagination. You see, up till that time, whatever imagination I had was conscientiously throttled. I was afraid of it. Mind you, the story did not give me an idea, but it made me rise up in self-disgust and smash the shackles of my brain. Perhaps you saw it?"

"Yes," I said briefly, "I saw it. Please go on."

"Well, that particular article seemed written quite unconsciously straight to me, by some woman I never heard of. It was so directly personal that I couldn't even review it. It would have been desecration. After that it seemed that nothing was impossible and that the world was full of things and situations designed expressly for my own particular use. It looks now as if the only matter to be considered is the method of doing big business. Curiously enough, I have already ceased to consider the possibility." He swung in his chair. "Sounds beastly egotistical, doesn't it? We're leaving next week to spend the autumn in Montana in the mountains. I have to look over some properties there."

I glanced again at his wife. "Have some tea. Your husband has forgotten all about you." The lace at her throat had begun to move stormily, but her face was as quiet as ever.

"I wonder if I'll ever know that woman," interjected Alderson thoughtfully.

His wife looked at him with inexpressible promise in her eyes. "Somehow I think you will," she said softly.